INDUSTRY GROWTH

By Karl Czymmek

Careful farmstead planning is critical for continued business sustainability

Preparing your dairy farm for the future from an environmental perspective

Many dairy farms in the Eastern United States have a long, proud history. Some of these operations have been in business for 50, 100, even 150 years or more. Longevity of a business speaks to the hard work and sacrifices made to keep things going, especially in a family business like farming. Most of these farms have gone through many changes over time as technology and ideas have evolved with each succeeding generation.

In some cases, each change was seen as the last, and without careful planning, the next change was that much harder to make. Careful farmstead planning has never been more critical to continued business sustainability. Where to add the next barn, or build feed bins, can have big impact down the road. In hindsight, there will always be mistakes, but they can be limited with planning. If planning for production structures like a barn is critical, it is even more so for accommodating environmental requirements. It is likely that many farmers will need to make changes to meet new environmental rules and regulations over the next 10 to 20 years, especially if growth is in their future. Here are some things to think about:

Farmstead:

Your farmstead location may have been good enough for the last 150 years. Does that mean it is still a good place? Your ancestors picked a great spot to farm. They were mainly concerned with having a consistent water source for the cattle, washing utensils and for cooling fresh milk. Many of these places are still adequate for a modern farmstead, others not so much. Is it possible your business will see growth? If so, can you honestly assess the location to see if it will be suitable for future changes? If not, is there another location on the farm that would be better? What could that look like?

Where does milk house wash water go? Does a ditch or stream turn white twice a day during the washing cycle? If so, make sure this system gets upgraded -- add the water to a manure spreader, manure storage or a vegetated treatment area.

Tower or bunk silos with tile drains underneath? Know where they go and keep an eye on the drainage.

Installing new silage storage? Are there old tile drains that need to be cut off? Plan to catch silage leachate for land spreading with manure -- when it gets into water it has such a high demand for oxygen that fish and other water life may have a hard time surviving. Many ag-related fish kills are related to silage leachate. Also, plan enough space around the bunk that runoff from rainfall or snowmelt can be collected and treated in a grass filter area. It is not uncommon to see bunks built in stages and they are not graded in the same direction or are constructed too close to a ditch or stream. It is much harder to retrofit a conservation practice after the concrete is poured, not to mention more expensive. In some

Please turn to page 30

FYI

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to make sure that each person has only one supervisor. It is also important to note that if you have employees whose first language is not English, and who feel more comfortable speaking their native language, the person who helps with translation may be very influential. Be attentive to this situation, and make sure you are comfortable with that person's leadership.

4. Employees want to know how they are doing. Providing continuous feedback is important because employees will be accustomed to this type of interaction and when a behavior needs to be corrected the conversation will be positive and constructive.

5. Employees want to know the rewards for top performance. It is also critical that employees understand what performance is necessary to earn incentives, such as quality bonuses.

6. Employees want to know where the organization is going. Employees should have easy access to the farm's quality reports and they should be updated on the goals of the business. Monthly meetings are a great way to communicate business goals. For example, if you are planning to expand and will have some overcrowding issues, it is important that your employees understand what is happening, the timeline, and how it will affect their job requirements.

7. Employees want access to production information. It is important to promote strong internal communication and provide practical information on production and quality. For example, the milking crew should be aware of the somatic cell count, while the maternity pen group should have information on dead on arrival and dystocias. Charts displayed in the break room or offices that can be updated on a monthly basis are a great way to share this information.

8. Employees want management's support, respect and encouragement. Although it may be difficult to let go of jobs that you are used to doing, giving a properly trained employee autonomy and the power to make decisions may go a long way to foster a culture of success. This shows support, respect and encouragement.

9. Employees want employers to recognize that they have a life outside of work. Although work on a dairy is demanding, providing some time off and flexible hours on a case by case basis, will help maintain the positive atmosphere that is essential to a successful business.

10. Employees want problem employees dealt with decisively and quickly. Although it can be difficult to confront a problem employee, the faster you take decisive action, the easier it will be for everyone involved. The critical part is that you have to be fair and consistent with discipline. Consequences of failure to comply with workplace rules should be clearly communicated.

By following these 10 simple guidelines, you will have a very good foundation for the human resource effort within your business.

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continued from page 28

extreme cases, bunks or portions of them were abandoned because there wasn't room to do a proper job with collecting and treating leachate or runoff.

Manure storage. At least one eastern state has a winter spreading ban, and USDA and many other states, are taking a closer look at this practice. While it is far from clear that every farm will be required to store manure, it makes sense to take a look and see if it could work for your operation. Can you get cost sharing? Will it work with your manure and bedding source? Can you handle the shift in workload? Are there custom haulers available? As important, where could storage be located and how does it fit in your farmstead plan? Will you be sorry you put the new heifer barn in a spot that would really have been better location for manure storage five years down the road? Or, the other way around, did you put manure storage in a place that would really look good for a cow barn in five years?

Barnyards or "pastures"? By most definitions, pastures should have green, vigorous vegetation during the growing season as long as rainfall is adequate. Often, overstocked pastures turn into dirt lots. Even good pastures will have small areas where heavy use prevents grass from thriving, but some farms have acres of dirt lots. At a minimum, these areas should be separated from streams by healthy grass to help filter the runoff. Better yet, match stocking rate to the pasture productivity, keep feeding areas away from streams and move them around to give vegetation a chance to recover.

Fields:

Take care of your soil and it will take care of you. Regular soil sampling, good crop rotation, reduced tillage, cover crops, strips, sod waterways and contours will help to deliver good yields and reduce off-farm impacts at the same time.

Whether you are buying, selling or staying the same, farms where fertilizer and manure have been well-managed will be more desirable than those that have not. This means that fields are well-balanced across the land-base, the manager has made efforts to distribute manure widely. Soil test P is medium to high, maybe some very high. Fields testing very high or excessive for P are starting to be viewed as potential problems and may not be able to receive manure in the future. Clearly that is a problem if you have many of these fields and have cows or other livestock. Take action now to manage P in rations, limit P fertilizer only to where necessary, limit or eliminate manure imports from neighbors; if you already have plenty of your own manure, try to find export opportunities. A good nutrient management plan based on regular soil testing and sound agronomy will help tremendously with this and make some money too.

Many public and private sector experts can help a farmer evaluate their current circumstance and identify farmstead conservation practices. Not as many folks can help with a general farmstead plan. You should put together a team of trusted advisors to help with this -- maybe another farmer, nutritionist or veterinarian. Look for folks who have seen other operations and can bring good ideas to the table. Unless you are certain the next generation is not going to be part of your farm, do them a favor and plan ahead! ❐